

Statement by Karen Evans
[at AMHI in 1963 or 1964]

September 14, 2003

Why did you go to AMHI? I was court committed in California because of a serious suicidal attempt. At that time my father, who was in the military, was being sent overseas. My mother requested of the military to move our family closer to her family in Portland, Maine. I was flown by military carrier to Augusta, Maine, from California. I was kept restrained on a gurney in a four-point restraint position for the whole trip, except for several cigarette breaks. We used a catheter to address my bathroom needs. The voices that I heard were so convincing that I had made many attempts to harm myself, such as pouring boiling water over myself, pouring lighter fluid on myself and striking a match and other self-harming behaviors. I needed to be hospitalized to be kept alive.

When you think of AMHI, what memories come to mind? I have many scary memories of AMHI. I believe most of the negative memories were because of the warehousing that happened, because of overcrowding, along with paternalistic attitudes that didn't allow room for individual rights. The most prominent memory was of a ward of thirty beds with women anywhere from the age of 15 to 80, headboard to headboard with each other. I a young girl of 16 or 17 being placed in the bed next to a woman who had killed her five children. I know I spent a lot of time in seclusion and I believe it was my way of dealing with my own voices and the fear of what this woman in the bed next to me might do.

I remember shock treatment day, when you didn't have any rights, especially the right to refuse shock treatments, if you were court committed. So the women on my ward would all try to run to the shower to get our hair wet. In those days they didn't have blow dryers and if your hair was wet they couldn't shock you. I remember the look on the women's faces after the shock treatments...the sense of lost souls walking around.

I remember a female friend I had made one night telling me she would rather be dead then to live the way we were forced to live on the unit. You were treated like herded sheep, not individuals. As long as you went along with the herd master, life was okay. But if you dared think for yourself, you found yourself in trouble, in other words seclusion.

I remember the next morning, I went to a room, I can't remember why she wasn't on the ward, she had her own private room. As I entered, she had her head through the bar, proceeded to break the glass with her right fist and place her jugular vein on the broken glass. Blood was everywhere. Yet the staff called some sort of code and all of us were told to go sit down in the living room. I don't know whether she lived or died. We were not allowed to talk about it. That is just allowing us grieving. I do know that she never returned to the unit.

When were you there, how long were you and how many times were you there? I was there in either 1963, 1964, I am not exactly sure. I had spent two years in institutions between 1962 and

1964. I managed to escape from four of the institutions, but my behavior because of the voices always got me caught. I believe I was in AMHI for six months. I was only in AMHI once.

What was life like at AMHI? Because of the all of the warehousing that was going on at AMHI it felt like things were always kind of hurry up and wait. It was hurry up and get in line for breakfast and then wait because the line was so long. The same was true of med call. I remember hallways lined with people. We weren't allowed to go lay down in our room and so people would just line the hallways and try to sleep. Chairs were chained to the side of the room and were around the edges. The rooms were dark and dreary.

Were there people at AMHI who affected you in a positive way or were there people who affected in you in a negative way? I truly can't remember, and no person stands out that affected me either positive or negative at AMHI. But they tended to have churches in the area that would come by and pay visits to the units. I do remember that and some of those people I felt really reached out to me. No matter what state I was in they seemed to truly care.

What was the culture at AMHI? There was a definite break between the staff and the consumers. You could sense that you were a lower class if you were a patient there then the staff people. I tended to connect best, I think, with my peers.

What treatment did you receive and what activities were you involved in at AMHI? I don't believe there was such a thing as treatment. I think the main thing was we were well medicated. We were over medicated. We walked like zombies up and down the corridor with the Thorazine shuffle and I can't remember any treatment plan at all. They did have activities. When I had better days I remember going to dances. I think there was a dance once a month and back then I was young girl and interested in those kinds of things. I had lots of fun at the dances.

How did staying at AMHI effect you and your family? As I stated earlier, back then the culture was to blame the parent and even though my mother wasn't perfect, but neither am I, it seemed like she was always being told that she couldn't come and see me and I think this was the way of blaming her for my illness, which I don't think was true.

What happened when you left AMHI? Because of my four prior escapes from different institutions I had learned where I had gone wrong on numerous accounts, like using my Social Security number and not changing my hair color. When I left AMHI, I never wanted to go back to an institution again. Because there was no such thing as discharge planning and because I didn't feel I had the skills to do much, I ended up taking on the life of the oldest professionals in the world. It was the only way I knew that I could support myself. It was in a different culture and I thought people would expect to find me. I was able to disguise my identity. It wasn't what I would have chosen for myself, but it was the only option that I felt I had because there was no, in those days there was no plan for you when you were discharged.

Is there anything else you would like to say about AMHI? Even though I have some serious negative memories of AMHI, I must say that AMHI was one place that kept me alive.

Talk about your experiences and thoughts for today. Talk about how you are doing today and what you are doing. Today I am fine, I am excited about this oral history project and feel like I have gone on and accomplished quite a bit with my life. I am the founder of the Wayside Evening Soup Kitchen. I am the founder of the Coalition for Dignity of the Homeless and Poor, which staged tent city in Portland. Now because of that we have shelter for the homeless here in Portland. I ran for the state senate seat here in Portland within my party and won the primary election. I feel like I have gone on and done a lot with my life. I worked at Catholic Charities Maine for 3.5 years as a peer specialist/transitional case manager and skills developer. I've worked at numerous other agencies within the community.

In what ways are you connected to your family? Today I have a good relationship with both, well my father, and my mother passed away this year. We were able to work through the difficulty of the stigma that they placed on her as well as on me. I have some wonderful friends that go to the church that I go to and are as much a part of my community.

Do you experience discrimination or stigma? I feel that the stigma from mental health is very much all around us. You see it in the media; you see it in the newspaper. If a crime was committed, the first thing that you hear is something about mental illness when the truth is that people with mental illness tend to be victims more than they are perpetrators of crimes. I felt it in job applications. I applied for a job and I felt I was discriminated and went to Maine Human Rights in regards to not getting the job. So I believe a stigma is around and we need to do a better job of educating the public.

What does recovery mean to you? What is the most important in the recovery process? To me recovery means inclusion and integration. It means that my voice is heard and that I am as much as part of my community as the next guy. What has been most important in my recovery process is my spirituality. It plays a key role. Without a belief in Jesus that I have, I don't think that I would have survived some of the stuff that I survived. My greatest challenge or obstacle is realizing that I don't live there anymore...that I don't have to go back there and face those demons. Even if I do have a hard time, I have a community and friends that support me and love me and nourish me.

Have your hopes and goals changed since you spent time at AMHI? I believe that whatever I set my mind to that I can accomplish. I believe that I can make my dreams and wishes come true. I believe that I don't live in that state any more.

What are your hopes and advice for the new Riverview Psychiatric Center? I would hope that seclusion and restraint would be a thing of the past...that we would no longer feel like we had to hold power over another person by tying them down and locking them away. I would hope that compassion and care would be at the center of the staff treatment of the patient.